

VIEWPOINT

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Mission Planning

Contents	
Indigenous Acknowledgement	1
Welcome!	2
What are we doing when we engage in “mission planning”?	2
Remembering those who perished on the SIEV X	4
Uniting Church Perspective on Mission	5
Radio Church – A Story of God at Work through Braidwood UC	8
God at work in conversation and support	9
Theology in University Chaplaincy	11
Reflections On Mission Planning At Tathra	13
How God might be active in our community	16
God at Work	18
A Good News Story from the Presbytery Treasurer	19
Tell the story	20
The Church working together for Community Chaplaincy on the South Coast	21
Expecting the Unexpected	23
God’s Presence at Greenhills Centre	24
Under the bee tree	27
Uluru Statement From The Heart	28

Indigenous Acknowledgement

Acknowledging the people of the Ngunnawal, Ngambri, Ngarigo, Yuin, and Gundungurra peoples, custodians from time immemorial of the lands on which the people of the Canberra Region Presbytery worship, serve and witness.

Welcome!

As I write this, I am at Gunna Park Campground north of Gympie in Queensland, half-way on my drive from Canberra to Mackay. My grandfather John Tulip arrived in Queensland about one hundred years ago from Durham in England and was given a horse and tent to establish a Methodist Church in Boonah. His faithful mission to do the work of God is an inspiration. I am now travelling to the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Saint Paul's Uniting Church in Mackay, where my grand uncle Jack Grant is on the honour roll after dying in France in the First World War.

Our prayers at this time are with Ukraine and for flood recovery. We should also pray for mission planning, as an activity that is essential to the future life and health and growth of the Uniting Church in the Canberra Region and more widely. This issue of Viewpoint contains a number of valuable contributions on mission planning. Thank you for reading our magazine.

In Christ

Robbie Tulip
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What are we doing when we engage in “mission planning”? What do we mean when we talk about “mission”?

Rev Dr John Squires

In approaching these questions, it may be helpful to explore a series of related ideas, and distinguish them from one another. Often, when people refer to mission, they mean one of these related ideas: evangelism, testifying (or bearing witness), converting (or proselytising), or perhaps engaging in dialogue. Mission is related to each of these words, but mission is not simply one or more of these words alone.

Mission is what God is doing in the world. It began long ago with the people of Israel, when God sent (missionised) messengers, prophets to speak guidance to the people. In Christian understanding, this mission came to a head when God sent (missionised) Jesus into the world. (The word **mission** comes from the Latin word *missio*, which simply means “to send”). We are called to join with this missional initiative, to find where God is already at work in the world.

Evangelism is work that is related to the good news (the *evangel*, originally a Greek word) ... work that is carried out through words, through actions, through being a presence. We are called to undertake this work in the ways that are most appropriate and most fruitful in each particular circumstance. The aim is to make that good news known as a reality for other people. That can be by words, by actions, in personal relationships, in working groups, in communal undertakings.

Testifying or Bearing Witness is offering our words to explain how we have experienced God, how we have been swept up in the mission that God is undertaking in the world, how we have experienced the good news (*evangel*) in our lives. We are called to communicate our personal experience of this good news carefully, in contextually relevant ways, and in respectful relationship with others. The story is ours to tell!

Conversion is an effort made to change someone's mind, to turn someone FROM something and TOWARDS something else, to turn them so that they join WITH you in your understanding of things. It necessarily involves persuasion, a focus on convincing, an intention to arrive at a clearly-defined goal. It can all-too-easily teeter over the edge of respectful relationships into unhealthy pressuring behaviour. It needs to be undertaken (if it is seen as important) in a very careful, measured way.

Proselytism is a term that has gained a hard edge over time. It appears in scripture, when new converts to the Jesus movement are called *proselytes* in Acts. It literally means "coming towards". But in modern usage it has a harsh edge, often indicating the following of a prescribed formula, involving the use of pressure tactics, sometimes with verbal force that goes beyond mere conversation. It's not something that I personally see as important—or even valid—in undertaking mission.

Dialogue is another word that needs to be considered when we think about mission. Dialogue means to "speak across"; to speak with another person and appreciate them in their own right, valuing who they are and what they have to offer, engaging them in conversation that seeks mutual growth and deepened understanding of each other. Inevitably, in my experience, such conversations, when they facilitate genuine mutual encounters, can lead to new understandings, renewed commitments, and revitalised faith. And that is at the heart of mission!

So there is a cluster of activities that need to be considered when considering mission:

- **evangelism and witnessing to your faith** (telling and showing the good news from your personal perspective)
- **developing respectful relationships** with other people (building respectful relationships that enable deep sharing)
- **community engagement** with local groups (working in practical ways on a common cause, and in so doing, deepening relationships)
- **the ministry of presence** in the community (simply "being there", indicating that you are open to engagement and conversation with others)
- **developing faithful disciples** (working intentionally to deepen understanding, enliven passion, broaden commitment, strengthen capacity)
- **growing your church** (working with others to develop the worship, witness, service, and fellowship of the local community of faith)
- **advocating for the least** (taking a stand on issues of justice, seeking the common good for all)

Each of these aspects has a place when we think about "doing mission". For when we focus on mission, we start with a very simple premise: God is present and active in the world. From that premise, we can begin to see that people around us are engaged in activities that God has inspired. There are stories from people all around us, about how God is at work—in our congregations, in our families, in our communities, in any part of the world.

We join in the mission that God is already carrying out when the spirit leads us to find these people and join with them in partnership. The gospel then becomes declaring what God is already doing in our midst, in our time; interpreting the actions that we undertake together as expressions of God's loving care for the world.

In the midst of all of this, we will know that the church is formed in its fullness through this process of partnering with others. The community is the place where being disciples and being church is lived out. The mission that God is already undertaking in the world through these assorted people is the enterprise in which we participate, enthusiastically, hopefully, energetically.

Rev Dr John Squires, Presbytery Minister—Wellbeing, blogs on 'An Informed Faith' at <https://johntsquires.com/>

Remembering those who perished on the SIEV X

Paul Meyer

The SIEV X Memorial in Weston Park is dedicated to the memory of 353 people who died trying to reach Australia on 19 October 2001 when the boat carrying them, known as the SIEV X, sank in heavy seas near to Christmas Island. The memorial is a combined effort of schools, churches and community groups from around Australia, under the inspiration and leadership of author Steve Biddulph and the Rev. Rod Horsfield, at that time minister of Pilgrim Uniting Church in Launceston, Tasmania.

The memorial consists of a line of hand-painted poles, one for each victim, which rises from Lake Burley Griffin and curves and sweeps up the landscape of Kurrajong Point. At one point the line of poles divides to form the outline of the boat, 19 metres long by 9 metres wide. Visitors are invited to stand inside this shape and to ponder the difficulties faced by the 421 passengers in such cramped conditions.

The memorial was officially dedicated on the 6th anniversary of the tragedy in 2007, under a license from the ACT Government. Uniting Church congregations and organisations contributed 33 of the poles, including 3 from the ACT: Canberra City, St James Curtin and St Ninian's Lyneham.

Beginning in 2014 the Faith-Based Working Group of Canberra Refugee Action Campaign began having multi-faith services at the memorial to mark the anniversary of this tragedy. This group then took up the task of maintaining the memorial, a task for which the memorial's founders were very grateful as none of them lived in Canberra. This work involves ongoing maintenance such as mowing the grass around the poles as well as work that must be undertaken every few years such as repainting the poles and restoring the artwork on them. Recently the group replaced the signage at the site. The group also planned to have a major event at the memorial in October 2021 to mark the 20th anniversary but this had to be postponed due to restrictions on public gatherings during the pandemic.

"Spirituality is anything you do which takes you out of yourself."

Steve Biddulph

Again with the blessings of the founders, the SIEV X Memorial Association has now been incorporated in the ACT (previously it was in Tasmania) to take on the responsibilities for the memorial. These include holding the license from the ACT Government that requires maintaining the site and having public liability insurance.

The Association aims to preserve the memorial for future generations as a place for people to express their grief at such a tragic loss of life and as a testament to the hope and promise expressed by those who contributed the poles with their unique artwork. We also want to honour the inspiration of the founders of the memorial. As Steve Biddulph stated in a Conversations interview on ABC Radio National last year:

I can't be at peace with myself without doing something about what happened to the women and children on the SIEV X vessel. As we began to voice our feelings about this, all over the country schools and churches and communities knew what we were talking about. We built a national memorial on the Canberra lakeshore to remember them. That was the most spiritual thing I've ever done. Spirituality is anything you do which takes you out of yourself.

Rod Horsfield has also reflected on why he felt compelled to work with Steve and others to produce the memorial:

We decided we couldn't ignore this, as the government was treating it as if the deaths of 353 people were of no consequence. We felt quite strongly that Australia was ignoring its international obligations to refugees and asylum seekers, because the fact is that people have every right to flee in fear for their lives and ask other countries for safe haven. It really resonated with me as a person of faith because we had a firm conviction that it was our Christian responsibility to offer hospitality to the stranger and the refugee.



The SIEV X Memorial Association is open to membership from people who support its objective of preserving the memorial. Offers to assist the Association in expanding its activities (establishing an archive, producing publicity material, managing its website and social media pages, fund raising) and to help with on-going maintenance would be most welcome. These can be made by contacting the Association: info@sievxmemorial.com

Paul Meyer is a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church at Lyons and of the Faith-Based Working Group of Canberra Refugee Action Campaign. He has been helping with the upkeep of the SIEV X Memorial for the past 8 years and is the president of the SIEV X Memorial Association. The Canberra Region Presbytery Social Justice Group convened by Evan Mann supports the Refugee Action Campaign.

Uniting Church Perspective on Mission

Andrew Smith

Our thinking about mission can oftentimes be too narrow. When I was a child growing up in the church, my understanding of mission was that it happened overseas through people that the congregation had sent. The congregation saw slide shows and heard reports about the work of mission when these missionaries came back to Australia on furlough. Their work involved telling people about Jesus and planting churches.

As I was growing up, I began to hear that Australia was the new mission field. I heard from people who had been on beach missions where the focus seemed to be about having a lot of fun with children on beach holidays and creative ways of telling them about Jesus.

Growing up even more, I became aware of Parish Missions that engaged in community service programs like meals for people in need and other support services.

Seeing that mission is more than just any one of these leads us toward searching for a broad framework in which to understand the full spectrum of mission. The UCA National Assembly report: *The Mission of the Church, Report of the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia (2002-2008)*, offers such a framework. You can access this document from the following Assembly link: [Mission of the church : Report Roman Catholic and UCA dialogue 2002-8 | UCA Assembly \(recollect.net.au\)](https://www.recollect.net.au/mission-of-the-church-report-roman-catholic-and-uca-dialogue-2002-8)

Here, I will take excerpts from chapter three of the report to give you a taster of what is on offer. The report describes the Uniting Church perspective on mission in terms of

- Worship,
- Communion,
- Service,
- Proclamation,
- Witness,
- Teaching.

I hope this will help you grow toward a broad perspective of mission for understanding the mission of your church and your own discipleship.

For the Uniting Church the mission of the church is defined by the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God. This is understood first and foremost through the revelation of Jesus Christ which is spoken of in the Scriptures. The mission of God as the reconciliation of all things with God through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit is lived in a range of ways. God's mission in Christ involves:

The right response of praise to God – Worship

The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church locates the key and decisive elements in the church's corporate worship as follows. It is in baptism that the Christian life begins, in communal listening to Scripture that God's Word is heard and in the fellowship of the Lord's Supper that Christians are fed and strengthened for service.

God's mission in Christ, which is to deal with the brokenness in our relationship with God (sin) and to draw all things to God, is both celebrated and participated in through the power of the Holy Spirit in gathered worship. In gathering together, the church embodies what it is already in Christ and what it is becoming through the Spirit. The worship of the gathered community undergirds the mission of the church and empowers people for their daily life of worship.

The building of union between God and the creation and within the creation – Communion

Integral to the mission of God in Jesus Christ is God's will to draw all things into communion with the triune life of God. The will of God for a communion in being is expressed poignantly in Jesus' prayer of John 17 when he prays, not only that the unity of believers will be the same unity as shared by the Father and the Son, but that they will share in the very unity of God.

Whilst this unity is celebrated and expresses the worshipping, witnessing life of the church, the Uniting Church also places great importance on the unity of believers and the work of ecumenism.

The desire for unity, however, stretches beyond ecumenism and into the whole world. In the inaugural Statement to the Nation made in 1977, the Uniting Church declared: "We, who are members of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, address the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long and at times difficult, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race."

Thus, the unity of believers with one another and God witnesses to God's intention for all things and calls the church into the service of the creation for which Christ died.



The healing of a hurting and unjust world – Service

God's mission in Christ is also expressed in Christ's compassion for the world. This compassion revolves around bringing reconciliation and wholeness to people's lives. The incarnation of Christ reflects God's concern for the creation and the promise of God is for a renewal of the creation.

The sharing of this message of good news with others – Proclamation

In Christ God proclaims the beginning of a new order of righteousness and love, pointing the creation towards its promised end: union with God. This good news of salvation is given for the church to share.

The proclamation of Christ as Lord takes place first and foremost in the context of the congregation. However, the firm belief found in the Basis of Union is that all people are called to respond to God's love in Christ and the proclamation must be made beyond the gathered congregation also.

The proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ occurs, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through human witness in word and action.

The witness to the truth of Christ and God's mission in and through him – Witness

Jesus' mission includes his witness to the work of salvation being carried out by God in Israel's history and conclusively through himself. Jesus' witness to his identity and God's work in him is taken up by the disciples and all those who believe, as part of the mission of the church. This means that, as an aspect of mission, the witness of the church is shaped by Jesus' own mission of witness.

The teaching of Christ's teachings – Teaching.

God's ministry in and through Jesus Christ is also typified as a teaching ministry. The teaching ministry of the church is understood in the Uniting Church as being grounded in Christ's teaching as the church continues to listen to its Lord afresh. In this the Uniting Church recognises its responsibility to continue to learn from Christ as well as instruct others about Jesus Christ and his teachings.

Rev Andrew Smith is Presbytery Minister Congregation Futures

Radio Church – A Story of God at Work through Braidwood UC

Pastor Julie Fletcher

Joan and Bill (names changed) dropped into the manse with some tools to donate to the Op Shop. A lonely couple in the mood for a chat, we heard about the recent death of Joan’s dad, and the challenges of packing up the remnants of his life. As the conversation moved to firmer ground, Radio Church became the topic. As you might know, with the onset of Covid restrictions, Braidwood UC approached the local community radio station with the hope of providing a church service on air. Steve, our treasurer, found a new passion for this unique, yet retro mission. This space grew with buy-in from the Anglican and Catholic congregations in town, and the truly ecumenical service seemed to be well received by the community. As church doors reopened and we once again met together in person, the station graciously allowed Radio Church to continue. However, Joan, a radio presenter herself, filled in more of the story. “We were not real keen when church on the radio was suggested. Who would want to listen to that? We thought it would be on air for just a short time, and you’d all give up.” Admittedly, we were thinking something similar. Little did any of us know what God would do with our foray into the public media. Bill continued, “We can’t measure how many listeners have their ears tuned to the radio, but we do count listeners that have joined from further afield through the internet. Blow me down if Steve and your radio church haven’t done better than any other presenter we have. Radio Church gets more than double the listeners that Joan



Steve Hostetler and Pastor Dr Julie Fletcher of Braidwood Uniting Church <https://mobile.twitter.com/braidwoodchurc1>

gets on air. We can’t believe it... but we want to know if Steve would do another time slot each week with gospel music.” After 100 ecumenical worship services on air, Braidwood Radio Church is going from strength to strength. It seems that Radio Church holds the largest congregation in Braidwood. Braidwood Community Radio on 88.9fm. Our call sign: “Many voices – Three congregations – One Great God.”

The 100th episode of radio church aired Sunday 20th Feb 2022. It began to connect Braidwood during lockdown Easter 2020. And has grown and grown. 30 people have used their talents on air. 6pm AEDT. Only on 88.9fm braidwoodradio.com.au

God at work in conversation and support

Rev Dr John Squires

Where have I seen God at work in the Canberra Region Presbytery? I have seen God at work in my living room, in the dining room of the Vikings Club at Erindale, in the meeting room at Melba Uniting ... in the toy-scattered welcoming kitchen/dining room of the Gungahlin manse and the neatly-ordered small meeting room at St Ninian's ... in Roses cafe in Goulburn and in the living room of the City manse in McKellar ... around the Kippax manse dining table and in the foyer of the Yarralumla church ... at The Knox in Watson and the Greengrocer Cafe in Goulburn ... in the online ZOOM space and in other places around the Presbytery.

What do all of these places have in common? They are where I have been over the past three years for gatherings of the weekly Tuesday Morning Ministers and Pastors Lectionary Conversation. Well, to be honest, for most of that time, we have been meeting online — but in the year I was in this Presbytery, before the COVID pandemic hit, we did venture to all those locations in person, and probably some others, as well, that I have forgotten. The custom, when I arrived, was for the hosting of the gathering (the location, the coffee, the nibbles, the ambience) to be shared around those who were part of the gathering. We were “at home” with one or another of our members each week.

How was God at work in these places? Well, through words: in conversations that flowed freely over the coffee and cheese, amidst debates about politics and theology, through explorations of liturgical practices and pastoral needs. God is, after all, the one who spoke, “and there was light”; who spoke again, decreeing that there be waters, “and it was so”; who spoke yet again, stating that dry land would emerge from the waters, “and it was so”; and so on (Gen 1:3–2:1).

God is a God of words—as we acknowledge when we confess Jesus as Word of God (John 1:1–2), as the way by which “in these last days ... God has spoken to us” (Heb 1:2). So it is no surprise that God has been at work through words!

And certainly there is no surprise that when ministers (charged specifically with proclaiming the Word) get together, God continues to be at work through words. For many years before I arrived in 2019—some have told me for a good decade prior to this—the Tuesday morning lectionary conversation has been a “Canberra Region Presbytery institution”. It has been greatly appreciated by many ministers in our congregations over the past decade or longer.

I’ve been told by colleagues formerly in placements in this Presbytery, just how important that gathering has been—sharing insights about tricky or difficult elements in biblical passages offered by the lectionary, helping people talk through ideas for sermons, allowing for a deeper discussion of theological ideas, debating politics (local, national, and American), sharing of innovative ideas for ways of preaching, and the like. This group has been a most distinctive sign of how God has been at work in this Presbytery.

It is true that words for all of these things (biblical passages, ways of preaching, political issues, theological ideas) have continued, through the pandemic, as we transitioned to weekly meetings online (oh no, not *another* online meeting!)—although the nature of the online discussion has varied over time.

In the early stages, from March 2020 on for a few months, the conversation was dominated by questions: how can we do this? what are you doing? what is the best way to do x or y or z? how are

your coping? how are your people coping? what are you doing for music? does anyone have any ideas about how to engage kids online? when will this end? and so on ...

Over time, the focus shifted, back to the original intention of canvassing insights and exploring ideas relating to the four biblical passages set in the lectionary for the coming Sunday. Alongside that, the increased pastoral care that was being offered, and received, by members of the group seemed to consolidate and develop.

At some point later in 2020, I stopped referring to “the Tuesday morning lectionary discussion” and started calling it “the Tuesday Morning Ministers and Pastors Lectionary and Pastoral Support Conversation”. Quite a mouthful, yes—but remember, this is a group about words!!

And one most important change that has occurred over the last two years: holding this group online has meant that it has been possible for colleagues in placement “on the coast” and “in the country” to join those based “in the capital” on a regular basis, with no travel time (and no petrol costs), all from the luxury of the home study! We really can be ministers and pastors from the whole presbytery meeting together, this way.

It’s important to note, also, that in parallel to this weekly gathering of ministers and pastors, in the early months of the pandemic, a similar gathering was offered online for lay leaders. This was especially for those in congregations where there was no formal ministry placement, where lay people bore the heavy weight of leadership in uncharted times; but we were also joined by lay leaders from some congregations with ministry placements, also sharing the load. Andrew continued to host a monthly gathering for lay leaders throughout 2021 and this is continuing in 2022, exploring resources designed to strengthen discipleship and enliven mission. It’s another sign of how God is at work in our Presbytery.

Now that you know about this group of ministers and pastors gathering weekly, of course, you might well think back to that (rare) occasion when your own minister or pastor preached a “dud” sermon. (They happen, I confess.) Perhaps the reason was, not that your minister or pastor was having an “off day”; perhaps they actually “tried on for size” an idea from a colleague, perhaps it wasn’t just right in that different context, and so it flopped. Perhaps ...

I’ve been privileged to serve in eight different Uniting Church Presbyteries over my decades in ministry, and I can vouch for the fact that this kind of gathering—weekly, hosted, relaxed and informal yet focussed on a clear set of goals—is a unique aspect of ministerial life within the Uniting Church. It is regular, self-directed, outcome-oriented yet interpersonally-friendly. And so, I am confident that this is one way by which we can say that “God has been at work in the Canberra Region Presbytery”.

Rev Dr John Squires, Presbytery Minister—Wellbeing, blogs on ‘An Informed Faith’ at <https://johntsqires.com/>

Theology in University Chaplaincy

Robbie Tulip

The chaplaincy at the Australian National University seeks to engage students with a vision of the mission of God in our world. We often find that the theological ground has shifted under us. Today's university students are largely not interested in religion. For the majority, God is absent from their world, except as an irritating claim made by people they do not respect or listen to. In this context, thoughtful dialogue about Christian theology is highly challenging, facing a small and rather sceptical audience.

Looking to the Bible as inspiration for a rational faith in God can help us to engage with modern ethical concerns, encouraging students to engage in conversation about religion, to explore and debate how theological understanding can relate to all our concerns. This is an approach I have tried to promote nationally through the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM). A stumbling block is that many students today see the concept of rational faith as contradictory. Christian chaplaincy at University, working in a multi-faith and secular culture, therefore faces the task of promoting conversation on topics that are widely condemned as irrelevant to modern life.

A starting point can be to see how Jesus Christ as presented in the Gospels is a unique model for our life today. The courage, vision and wisdom of Christ have a liberating power and clarity and relevance. The message of the Gospels resonates down through the ages, challenging us to see how the great example of Jesus can live in our world.

Theology has to be controversial or it becomes empty. There are many questions posed by the Gospels that people would prefer to avoid. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) is among the most controversial texts in all world literature. Christ there calls for an extraordinary and seemingly impossible transformation of the values of the world to bring our society into accord with the will of God, recognising how the blessing and grace of God reveal our true potential and call us to mission.

The simple familiar line in [The Lord's Prayer](#), 'thy will be done on earth as in heaven', is an astounding call for human liberation, seeing the eternal values of God in heaven – love, justice, peace, truth - as our moral compass. This call for liberation is equally political and spiritual.

One of the most controversial lines in the Bible is the prophecy at [Isaiah 53:3](#) that the Messiah would be despised and rejected. This 'Isaiah Principle' presents the paradoxical idea that our salvation comes from something we hold in contempt. Our habits of pride and prejudice create powerful assumptions that lead us to ignore the message of Christ. The problem for normal psychology is that people want to claim they accept what is good for them. Instead, the Bible tells us people suffer from a perverse blindness to the message of healing and justice from the prophets. The dangerous implication is that our blindness puts the world on a pathway to destruction, requiring a transforming change to find a path of healing.

The story of the crucifixion of Christ exemplifies this theme of how human society is incapable of engaging constructively in discussion of how to repair and restore the world. When Jesus called on his society to transform its values, the response was derision, denial and execution. And yet the amazing story of the resurrection tells of the victory of divinity. The immense symbolic meaning of the [passion story of Christ](#) is that corrupt power in our world can be conquered by divine love.

Jesus represents the outcasts of the world. He tells us that what we do to the least of the world we do to him ([Matt 25:40](#)). This expression of solidarity and identity with all who are ground down by injustice and oppression is a message of hope and inspiration for the poor and marginalised. This call from Christ to respect those on the margins clashes with the view that looks only to prosperity within the current dominant paradigm. As a poor rural Jew living under the Roman Empire, Jesus was in a similar social position as Australian Aborigines under the British Empire, with exclusion by the invading culture reflecting the inability of imperial thinking to see other viewpoints.

In bringing the message of Christ to students today, ASCM's core values are that our faith must be open, active, ecumenical and critical. These are deeply challenging principles. An open theology respects all human traditions in a spirit of humble enquiry. An active theology sees that the Gospel is political, that the story of Jesus calls us to work for justice, peace, truth, reconciliation and love. An ecumenical theology is exemplified by the SCM international credo of the [World Student Christian Federation](#) from [John 17:21](#) "That all may be one".

A critical faith is among the most challenging and controversial principles. Critical thinking recognises how badly the church has been corrupted, and how conventional theology fails to express the true mission of Christ. A critical theology engages with philosophy and science, open to dialogue with modern radical opinion, looking for the truth that sets us free ([John 8:32](#)).

Critical theology applies scholarly historical method to reading the Bible, putting everything into radical doubt. A growing body of opinion in modern critical Bible scholarship is the highly controversial idea that the New Testament story of Jesus is entirely fictional. This argument is presented for example in [Richard Carrier's On The Historicity of Jesus](#). I was recently able to speak to a leading author of this strand of opinion, David Fitzgerald. Our conversation is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-5z2PfwKjY>.

Questioning the existence of Jesus is a line of thought that Christians tend to despise and reject with shock and scorn. Yet on the 'Isaiah Principle' of recognising that things we reject will be our cornerstone ([Psalm 118:22](#)), an approach of humility and respect can engage even with such surprising suggestions.

Perhaps our conventional literal approaches to scripture have been corrupted by the values of the world? Have church traditions been grounded more in emotion than in evidence? How much did the early church distort the record? Do we really know what the original Gospel authors intended? How do our beliefs really sit against historical and scientific evidence and logic? Does Christian faith depend on Jesus being real? Several committed Christian scholars, such as [Tom Harpur](#), [Hermann Detering](#) and [Thomas Brodie](#), have examined such questions to reconcile faith and reason, finding that the profound messages of Christian faith are entirely compatible with a sceptical historical method.

A Christian theology grounded in the message of Christ that the last shall be first in the Kingdom of God ([Luke 13](#)) supports contemporary values of diversity, equity and inclusion. Our church and society should repent for the structural injustice and prejudice that has excluded women, indigenous people, GBLTI people and many others from full participation and equality. The world faces massive crises, under pressure from climate change, environmental collapse, a remorseless pandemic, political and economic polarisation and war. We look to Jesus Christ, our prince of peace, as providing the inspiring message of love, truth, peace, justice and reconciliation that can enable us to work together, in the words of the [SCM Solidarity Song](#), to build a new just world.

About ASCM: The Australian Student Christian Movement was founded in 1896 and was the main Christian organisation at Australian universities. With cultural shifts over recent decades ASCM is now very small, with not much university presence, but it retains a significant support base, and is the Australian affiliate of the World Student Christian Federation, opening links to a range of much larger national Student Christian Movements. The website ascm.org.au has a lot of interesting material.

Robbie Tulip is National Director and magazine editor of the Australian Student Christian Movement, Secretary of Canberra Region Presbytery, worship leader and Council member at Kippax Uniting Church, and Manager of the ANU Chaplaincy.



The 2022 ASCM Financial Appeal Mailout

Reflections On Mission Planning At Tathra

Peter Howe is an elder at Tathra Uniting Church. Here he gives some personal observations on church growth.

Tathra Uniting Church had a rebirth in 2018 when a group moved out to form a new church. It was a painful separation, but it cleared the way for both groups to grow. In the beginning our numbers were of biblical proportions. Twelve. Small, but amongst us was a huge amount of devotion and Christian experience. We've had modest growth. We now have a membership of about thirty and a weekly attendance of twenty or more.

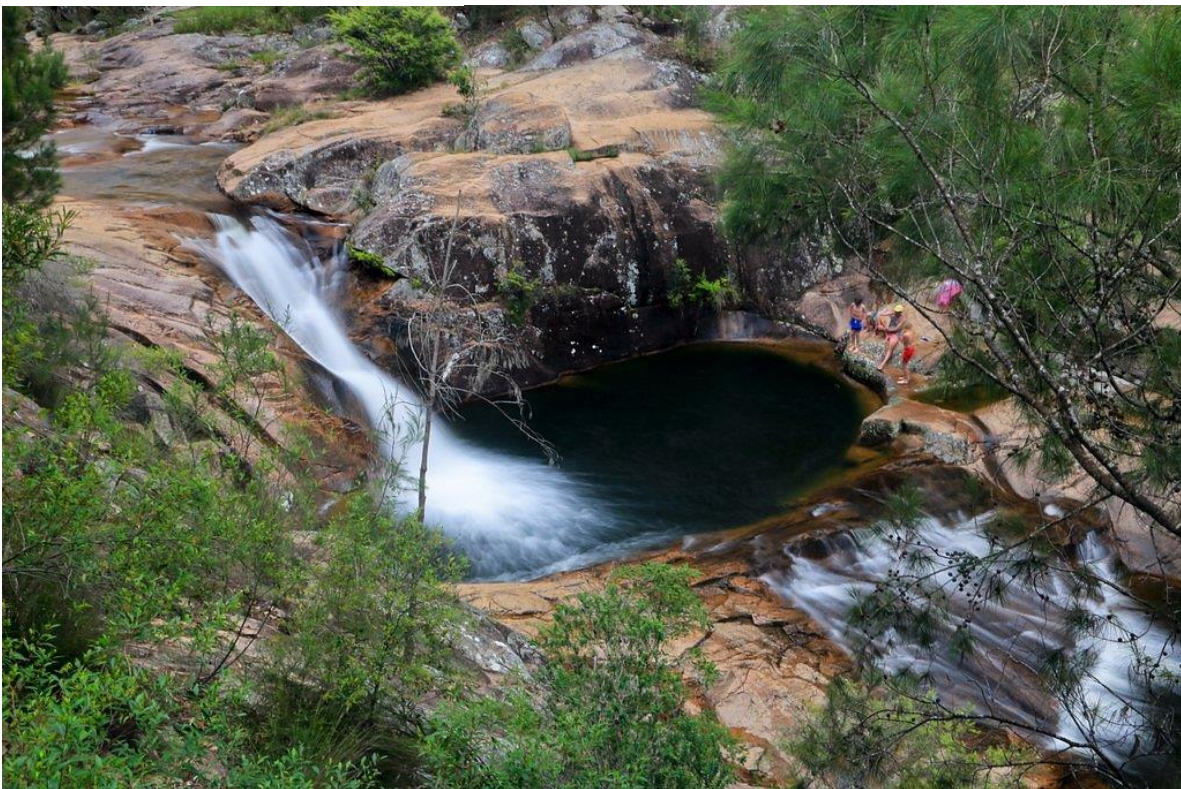
What caused us to grow? What worked? If the truth be known, I'm not sure. I don't think any of us set out to grow the numbers in our church. What we wanted to do initially was meet and grow in love. If there was any doctrinal unity I think it was grounded in a refusal to sit submissively under neoconservative bible teaching. Jesus said the kingdom grows like a mustard seed, so given the right conditions the plant will flourish. What are the conditions in our church? Again, we'd all probably have different views on that, and I think that's one of our strengths. Not so much our different views but our desire to listen respectfully and eagerly rather than to judge and rebuke. I think we're all working on our ability to see God in everyone. We were fortunate in our early days to be taught by

wise, spirit filled Ross Kingham who left spaces between his sentences and paragraphs for the Spirit to speak. I think Ross opened up our experience of listening to God.

Yesterday I asked a newcomer what she saw in our church and she said it was contemplative. I'm sure she's right. Our small meditation group grows gently in love. One of the elements of our contemplation is a willingness to wonder and marvel at the unfathomable glory of God rather than tie Scripture in knots to give a glib answer to every question.

A cheeky newcomer who returned after an absence told me he'd decided to give our church another chance. I asked him what he was looking for in a church. Fellowship, he said. I haven't heard that word for a while, but I'm sure it describes relationships in a healthy community, the knowledge that people belong and are appreciated for who they are. I'm remembering a talk I heard last year in Andrew Smith's Fresh Expressions Zoom meetings. Mike Frost said that Christianity began in the loving relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and inevitably flourished because of relationships based on that. People say this love is strong in our church. I certainly feel loved and appreciated. I feel more and more able to trust my soul to these kind and gentle people.

Mumbulla Falls and pool near Tathra



Which brings me to another observation about growth. Our church is not the centre of the kingdom. We have precious ecumenical relationships with people from other local churches. We don't own Jesus. We celebrate growth in all churches. It's God who grows churches, and we're a tiny connected part of this great movement that in every era struggles to interpret and communicate our sacred texts in the light of what humanity is facing at the time.

What happens in our services? Lots. Many of us organise them and I'm counting at least seven who have preached. There is no formula. Each service leader decides the format. People say they enjoy coming to church not knowing what will happen. We agree to base our bible teaching on the lectionary, but it's not compulsory. It's a comfort to know we're joining millions of people in traditional mainstream Christianity when we encounter and explore sometimes unfamiliar texts from

the Lectionary. Recently three of us preached a series on the Wisdom Literature, informed by the teaching of John Squires and Elizabeth Raine from Presbytery.

I think I could safely say that was a spiritual breakthrough because we faced the challenge of coming to grips with passages that broadened our understanding of Scripture and of God. An example is Proverbs 8 and 9 where Wisdom is personified as a woman who was with God at Creation. Yesterday Judy Grasby led a service in which she asked people to stand if they were involved in the ministry of leading services, then music, then maintenance, hospitality, Op Shop etc. We looked around at the end of Judy's list and realised we were all standing. All of us. In the same service Tracey Austwick led communion by asking us to stand in a circle facing each other to eat and drink, then to turn around and face outwards, looking out the windows to the community and the world outside. To me they were two pieces of brilliant kinetic poetry. Creativity and freedom to serve seems to be exploding. There's such an eagerness to participate.

We've benefited by watching Jesus the Game Changer once a month or so, looking at the history of Christianity through interviews with prominent international scholars. It's been good to stand back and see how Christianity grew, and a good reminder that Christianity flourished for more than a thousand years before the Reformation ravaged Europe.

I've been reading our mission plan. I feel comfortable about it; committed to the actions it sets out. I think the reason we can commit to these actions is a shared love that underlies what we do coming from a place where hope never dies. We follow Jesus in love for God, people and all Creation. How can we not grow if that underlies our planning? People are hungry for meaning and purpose, hungry to be part of something bigger than themselves, hungry for healthy Creation, for justice, hungry for imperishable love. Isn't that all of us?

What we've done in our particular situation has borne fruit, but it's not a formula. If there is a formula in our church, it's based not on structures, budgets and plans, though they are pivotal, but our relationships with each other and God. What we decide to do emerges out of listening to each other and to God. Every community is different, every church is different. I recall being touched by God's spirit in very formal traditional church settings, in noisy ragged pentecostal ones, in silent ones and in our often unique services at Tathra. What touches me is not so much what is done but the genuine reverence that underlies it; genuine humility, servanthood, a deep, heart mind and soul commitment to the way of Christ. If I'm moved in a service I often find myself thinking; "Hey, these people are fair dinkum followers of Jesus".

As we look at what we'll do this year, I'm encouraging all of us to remember the way of Jesus. How did he start his ministry? Not by doing, but in prayer, encountering God in the wilderness. When he began his mission, how did he start his busy days? Again and again the gospels tell us that what Jesus did grew out of his relationship with God in prayer. Look at the effect of those three years on human history! If we put our relationship with Jesus first, our churches become spiritual DNA for the new heaven and the new earth....

As I look back over this story I'm realising how many times I mentioned Presbytery. We could not have grown without their help. We don't plan to have a paid minister, which in quite a few ways has benefited us. However without the the early months of paid ministry from Ross, the refreshing input of New Expressions, lay preacher training, Zoom bible studies and the Revised Common Lectionary we might have gone off the rails. I'm more and more convinced that being part of the Uniting Church has allowed the scales to fall from our eyes, so to speak.

The world is troubled. These are uncertain times. We spend our days in liminal space. Some Christian groups persist in trying to take us all back to a fixed worldview that was only ever good for some. The Uniting Church on the other hand has a theology open enough to allow us to approach our communities with a freely expressed eternal hope that people feel when they encounter our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness. The Holy Spirit is busy all around us, beside us, inside us. It's easy to forget that. Remember Elijah, who sat on the mountain overwhelmed by his problems. He looked for God in the wind, in the earthquake and the fire. Then exhausted, he realised that God was whispering in his ear.

Tathra Beach and Wharf



How God might be active in our community

Kippax Uniting Church Council

In early 2020, the past and present members of the Kippax Uniting Church community came together to mark its 50th birthday. We celebrated the past and we shared our concerns and hopes for the future. And we heard one another talk about the needs of some of our members to engage with faith and church differently.

It was uplifting. It was disconcerting. It was a beginning.

And very soon afterwards the world changed. And 2 years on, it still is.

Kippax Church Council's immediate priority moved to safeguarding the health of our congregants, our staff and volunteers and that of the men, women and children reliant upon the services provided through our UnitingCare arm. Through the months that followed we necessarily became

physically isolated from each other, but we found our way back together to continue the conversations that we had started. We also had a few other conversations that we simply not had the time or the confidence to have - together.

For some time, Church Council had been examining how we might respond to some of the worship and societal trends already impacting us; changing congregational dynamics, differing worship needs, stretched human resources, an ageing congregation and facilities challenges. The more difficult elements of these conversations are some that we've been on the verge of having, that we've skirted around and at times have not known how to initiate. These difficult elements involved accepting the need for change, embracing the uncertainty that comes with new ways of doing things, and the realisation that sacrifices may be required for us to live out God's mission in our neighbourhood right now. Having these discussions has led us to wrestling with the question of how we want, should and need to live out our mission in a way or in ways relevant to our changing community, and as it turns out, our changing world.

There are parallels between Kippax Uniting Church and the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. Like those disciples, the Kippax community has been journeying through change and uncertainty. Now we find ourselves at a cross-road. We understand that there are some elements of our mission that, while central to our journey in their traditional form, cannot be those which lead us into the future. And like the disciples, we are seeking to walk with those we meet along the road and hope to see Jesus in them.

COVID, in all its terror and tragedy and in its carriage of tremendous life-altering effects, has given our congregation and our Church Council the space and the time to focus on who we have been and who we are now. Central to very frank, very deliberate and often challenging conversations, workshops and our planning days has been acknowledging that to enable the engagement of all those who seek to live out God's promise, we need to explore fresh ways of being church that provide opportunities to any and all people to worship.

The move from conversation to trying new ways of church was gifted to Church Council by a congregation who generously not only came along with us in our trial of new expressions of worship and community engagement, but joined in and genuinely, absolutely valued the sense of creativity that comes with risk. Each time we have approached the Congregation with a new idea or challenge the response has been a resounding 'yes' and sometimes even a "why don't we go further?"

And our congregation would be the first to acknowledge that not everything is going to work all the time. At other times, things will work for a season but not need to become a long term part of our congregation's life. Our process of learning and experimenting has had some great successes: an online church camp during the 2021 lockdown, a walking church which continues to bring together a diverse group of people, and a scavenger hunt attracting more than 50 participants from across the generations. Other things like a home church for young families was important in the early months of COVID but didn't need to be sustained.

And sometimes things are just not as easy as we first think. What was first envisaged as a three month project to establish fresh expressions of church has morphed into a slower (but hopefully richer) multiyear endeavour!

We have come to realise that we don't have the answers. But we do have a vision, and it's one of growth and sustainability through the expansion of our faith-based community in West

Belconnen. And we've learnt that our examinations and realisations are actually part of what is a national conversation being had by our Presbytery, the Synod and the Assembly.

We now know that there are, and we have reached out to, a number of organisations and people who are within the Church and external to it, who have tools and experience, who are ready and willing to talk about investing in Kippax's contribution towards growing our common wealth across the wider Uniting Church. Be they old collaborators or potential new partners, they have brought to our conversation an added vision for our community, and we hope that they might now work with us to bring it into being.

Part of acknowledging that we don't have all the answers is recognising that some of those answers lie beyond the Uniting Church. As we move into the next phase of our experiments with new ways of being church at Kippax, our congregation has made the decision to evolve our range of activities in partnership with the wider community with whom we operate, in the hope that this process will teach us anew what it means to be church in our time and place.

A simple conversation brings with it possibility; it might enable relationships that allow us to take another step along the road to discovering how God is active in our neighbourhood and how we are called to join in. We've more conversations to have and a long road ahead, but like the disciples, the congregation at Kippax finds our 'hearts burning within us' at the prospects God is presenting to us for the next fifty years.

God at Work

Rev Alistair Christie

Having attended school in Canberra, then Wagga Wagga Teachers College, I was appointed to and spent three years on the staff of Isabella Street Public School Boys' Department, Queanbeyan.

Raised in the life of the Presbyterian Church of St Andrew in Forrest, I was a member of the triennial Commonwealth Presbyterian Fellowship Conference in Perth. On the return journey I was challenged by a Methodist Minister to consider a call to Ministry.

My candidature began in 1960 with additional studies and in January 1961 I was appointed as a student home missionary serving in Gosford, Nyngan-Warren and Mona Vale. All very different situations with their individual stories.

During my exit appointment in Bourke, conversations began with Methodists about a joint co-operating agreement and ministry with the Flying Padre and Deaconesses. This was instigated by leaders of both local churches and although encouraged by people in both traditions it was knocked back by the Methodist Conference. In Bourke there was one morning worshipping group, Sunday School and other activities, and an evening youth focussed gathering from all the churches in town which had been a priority for several years.

Our four years in Molong, in the new Methodist-Presbyterian Joint Parish, included responding to an expressed community need for a preschool. Parish and community came together to establish the

Molong District Preschool. It is encouraging to see in Instagram this week that almost 50 years on it is still operating as Molong Early Learning Centre.

As Church Union came closer, this parish, in Molong, hosted a gathering of people from the rural communities and cities to affirm that they were important and had a significant place in determining ministry in their communities. This subsequently became the Central West Presbytery.

Delay in Union found us almost without a placement at the end of 1975, because it seemed no one wanted to move before Union set for June 1977. There was one possibility, in Canberra. Why would we want to be in Canberra?

An unannounced early morning winter trip to services in Manildra and Molong by Anglican? and people who were looking forward to the Uniting Church caught me by surprise. They were seeking a new minister for the Cooperating Holy Covenant Parish, meeting in Aranda Primary School, Belconnen.

This was not the first nor last time the Spirit challenged us. There was much to learn about these two congregations meeting in adjoining school halls, a canteen between, a common purse, a joint church council, Sunday School, Women's Group, Study Groups and other activities.

It was exciting to share in a collegial ministry with members of the two congregations and ministers/clergy. They were one of the co-operating churches operating in Belconnen, Weston Creek, South Woden. In Hackett and Curtin, Churches had been built by Anglicans and Halls by Presbyterians.

There's more to that story..... June 22nd 1977, caring for Refugees, Hospital and Aged Care Chaplaincy, Scripture classes in Primary Schools, ANU Combined Churches Chaplaincy, ecumenical relationships, constantly seeing God at work in people and their response.

A Good News Story from the Presbytery Treasurer

John Sutton

When I became Treasurer of Canberra Region Presbytery in late 2017, the Presbytery had a residual debt of \$1.5 million to Uniting Financial Services as a consequence of UFS taking over management of the Presbytery's UC Investment Fund in 2009. My objective was to reduce this debt to \$1 million by the time I handed over to someone else.

That debt has now been cleared completely. Isn't that a good news story?

The initial debt was \$5 million, but some of that was reduced by the sale of residual UCIF assets while still paying interest at about 4%. After a one-off payment in 2016 of \$500,000 from Presbytery funds, the loan stood at about \$1.5 million. During 2017 the Standing Committee agreed to make repayments of \$60,000 a year. Together with dividends of \$20,000 a year from residual assets and interest costs of \$40,000 year (2.8% on \$1.5 million) the annual net reduction in the loan was initially \$40,000. Under these conditions it would take about 30 years to repay the loan,

provided we had the ability to continue such repayments. It seemed that we would have the burden of the debt hanging over our heads and restricting our decisions for many years.

Many were unhappy about the way the loan arose. Some felt that there should have been no loan at all. CRP made an appeal to Synod in 2016 to waive the loan but this was rejected by the Synod Standing Committee. In 2020 I asked UFS to reduce the loan on the grounds of excess costs in the early days of the loan, but the current management did not want to visit what its predecessors did.

In 2021 the Financial Planning Task Group suggested seeking a reduction in the size of the loan on the grounds of improving the pastoral relationship between Synod and our Presbytery. This idea was taken up and an approach made to the Moderator, Rev Simon Hansford. Simon was receptive to this idea and discussed it with Presbytery leaders. He was supplied with documentation of the case. He eventually proposed that the debt of \$1.28 million be eliminated in full by a 50% contribution from the Synod Growth Fund and 50% from Pilgrim House, with the two residual assets transferred to those bodies. And so it came to pass.

Surely this is God at work.

Tell the story

Carolyn McAllister

1978: I returned to church. I was on a mission to find out the truth about Jesus – did he really rise from the dead. I randomly chose O'Connor Uniting Church, went along and discovered it was an evangelical church experiencing 'charismatic renewal'. I was wary. Yet something real I couldn't pinpoint drew me and I stayed, wanting to know more.

1989 – 1994: I helped with a magazine ministry in O'Connor's busy office. Helping brought me under the ministry umbrella and became a place to learn and grow as I contributed. My "road to Emmaus" journey deepened as trust grew and I knew I belonged.

1994: The majority of O'Connor members including all elders and staff made a decision to resign from the UCA and form Grace Christian Fellowship. I decided to remain in the Uniting Church, needing to understand more. I did not know who else would remain or what would happen. A few days later, 28 of us met with Presbytery Minister, Rev Ron Reeson.

To my relief God spoke clearly through the promise in Isaiah 6:13. The passage had been given to Ron as encouragement: *"Yet a tenth—a remnant—will survive; and though Israel is invaded again and again and destroyed, yet Israel will be like a tree cut down, whose stump still lives to grow again."* Living Bible.

2004: We printed a history booklet: "O'Connor Uniting Church ministerial reflections on the first 50 years". I am reminded of the nature of the life that continues in the O'Connor 'stump':

- "... ordinary everyday people believed the Holy Spirit could impact their lives and touch the lives of others."

Rev Dan Armstrong, O'Connor Senior Minister, 1981-1991, then full time itinerant evangelism and teaching (Kairos Ministries Inc.).

- "O'Connor remains in the memory as a vibrant, active church with a special love for the ministry of the Holy Spirit, expressed in a multitude of ways.

[Mission] teams were selected from among the membership of O'Connor and sent out to the four corners of Australia..."

O'Connor has always been a teaching church... the lessons learned through the years have been passed on to others...

Bob Arvidson, Administrator then Assistant Pastor 1980 -1991; Lay Pastor, Riverina Presbytery, 1991-2004.

- "In the very best sense I would see the work represented by Grace Christian Fellowship as a ministry spawned by the expansive vision and tenacious faith that gathered to worship in the [O'Connor church building], and in high school halls...

This great legacy cannot be confined to the exploits of the few, but to the constant faithfulness of the many..."

Brian Medway, O'Connor Minister 1983-91; Pastor of Grace Canberra (under the umbrella of Crosslink Christian Network) 1994-2021.

Today: The promise in Isaiah 6:13, given in 1994 as mentioned above, continues. It helps me see God in the following:

2019: A Uniting Church Minister from Adelaide wrote to O'Connor. He had 'out of the blue' found himself praying for us, aware of some of our history. In a step of faith he was writing "to ask after us and, if possible, to know ways to continue praying". He was happy to join with our leadership team "to pray for us and with us at any time". In later conversation about O'Connor mission teams visiting SA churches in the 1980's, he confirmed, "What a history of ministry and mission O'Connor has! We have been so blessed and are so thankful to the Lord".

2022: I have gone to Grace Canberra from time to time since 2013, aware of shared history and common roots with O'Connor. In January Brian Medway was retiring as Pastor and was passing the baton to Klaus Lehtimaki, formerly Pastor of Canberra International Church. Dan Armstrong, Minister of O'Connor, 1981-91, spoke via Zoom, saying what a blessing the people of Grace Canberra would be to Klaus; that he (Dan) knew this because he had known the church since 1981 - "no longer the same denomination - different label, same ingredients".

Carolyn McAllister is a member of O'Connor Uniting Church.

The Church working together for Community Chaplaincy on the South Coast

Rev Andrew Smith

One of the stories that quickly comes to mind for me about sensing God working across our Presbytery is an unfolding story about support for the new Community Chaplaincy position to be based in the Mt Dromedary Parish. The position will build capacity for communities which have been heavily impacted by a series of significant events: first, the profoundly serious drought conditions leading into 2019; second, the devastating 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires on the east coast of Australia; and third, the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has had specific regional impacts. The Community Chaplain will be based with the Uniting Church, to work across the region, engaging with communities, organisations, and individuals. The focus of this position is to work with individuals and groups in the communities as they transition into a "reconstruction" phase of recovery.

We had a great start to raising funds for this 2-year position. The Moderator’s Bushfire appeal had provided a big chunk of the funding from money donated across the Synod and beyond. The Presbytery and Mt Dromedary Parish also committed important funding.

With all these sources of generous funding, we still had a shortfall. That’s when a congregation in our Presbytery committed \$15,000 per annum for the two years. Another of our congregations gave \$2000, with plans to consider further contributions next year. One church couple donated \$10,000, and another church couple also committed \$5,000 per annum for the two years. How fantastic is that!!

In addition, a message came in from a member of another congregation saying ... “over the last couple of years I have been making holding crosses for our Congregation - and others on occasion. I gathered timber as I travelled. I visited the South Coast not long after the bushfires and collected timber that had been burned in the fires and swept onto the beach after heavy rain. I made several holding crosses from these charred bits. I’d be more than happy to hand these over to the community chaplain if they might be of use.”



A further offer came in to give support to the person who is appointed to the chaplain role. The kind of support envisaged includes:

- Prayer walking in the local area;
- Establishing and maintaining some relationships with church folk, community members, community organisations or other churches in Cobargo;
- Providing some pastoral care support or back up ministry support;
- Research, analysis and planning for Fresh Expressions type community opportunities (including contributing to strategic re-imagining);
- Organising community events or assisting with community events others are organising;
- Drafting grant or similar applications or contributing to other processes to secure resources for community recovery and healing activities;
- Considering how other churches in the area might provide some encouragement to the people of Cobargo;
- General community development, capacity building and resilience strengthening.

This unfolding story of a time when I think I clearly saw God at work across our Presbytery is very encouraging to me. I hope it is encouraging to you as well. It reminds me of accounts in the Bible about people in the early church contributing to the mission of Christ in other parts of the church (Acts 2:44; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9).

Expecting the Unexpected

I started my day sitting on the balcony of our apartment. As usual I began to pray, inviting God into my day to be a part of all that would happen.

Later in the morning at work one of our residents appeared at my office door. As I invited her in, she began telling me she wanted to talk to me about prayer. I was a little surprised, pleasantly surprised, as she had previously told me she was not a Christian and not particularly religious.

As there were others in the office, I asked her if she would like to talk in the chapel. We sat in silence facing each other for a few moments. I waited. Mary Jo (not her real name) then began to tell me she felt drawn to God, also expressing she wasn't sure if there was a God. Mary Jo continued by telling me she didn't know God and wasn't sure she believed in Him, but still wanted to pray but didn't know how to.

I listened carefully, giving positive encouragement to help her say all that was immediately on her heart and mind at the time. When she had finished, I began to explain to Mary Jo that there was no formula for prayer, no correct way and no incorrect way. That what might work best for her would be to just talk to God in the same way that she had talked to me. God, unlike people, was always



Chapel at Mirinjani Hostel, photo by Pastor Heather Potter

ready to listen and hear her. So, she could just have a conversation with him in the same way that we were having a conversation right then. Our conversation was coming out of a relationship of trust and in the same way she can trust God.

Mary Jo thanked me and asked me if I would pray for her and her family. Her son had passed away very unexpectedly a few months ago. It seemed to me this might have been the prompt drawing her toward God.

After I prayed for her, she thanked me, saying it was a beautiful prayer. Then she left and returned to her room.

A few days later she popped her head into my office again to tell me she was going into the chapel to pray. I simply smiled as she went into the chapel.

When I left my office a bit later I heard her chattering away to God just like she and I had talked

a few days earlier. She remained there for about 45 minutes talking to God before leaving to return to her room.

When we ask God into our every-day lives the stories we hear and the experience of stories we are a part of are often unexpected and a surprise.

Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome (Romans 8.26), reminds us that it's not the words we use but the heart we pray with that matters most. In fact there are times when in prayer we are simply lost for words. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."

Pastor Heather Potter is a Chaplain working with Uniting in Canberra on Community and Social Impact

God's Presence at Greenhills Centre

Harold Small

Greenhills is a community facility of the Uniting Church of Australia administered under the Presbytery of Canberra Region. The Centre provides group accommodation and conference facilities for up to 200 people within a Christian environment.

For a variety of reasons Greenhills holds a special place in the hearts of many. I remember clearly the leader of a Martial Arts group who regularly conducted team programs on site who said "There is something special about this place that makes us want to keep coming back."

My recollection of a particularly special time of awareness of God's presence was 18th January 2003, the day of the catastrophic bushfires. I was the Executive Officer at the time and happened to be on site. On that day as I watched the fires become more and more threatening my prayer was that if there was to be a loss then let it be just the Cotter Centre.

For some years the Management Committee had deliberated on the future of the Cotter Centre (the original ex-Defence huts with asbestos cladding set up in 1965). The kitchen and dining room had been relocated to a new building and the bathrooms and dormitory facilities had been upgraded. Even then the facilities still only suited a very limited group of clients and demolition was really a sensible option, a decision we would have found very difficult to make.

On that day there were about 50 people on site, 6 staff and the nightshift of a contingent of 90 interstate fire fighters who had established a residential base the day before. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon and all was pitch black as we waited for the onslaught. Everyone

was huddled in the downstairs auditorium with wet towels and curtains drawn. The fierceness of the fire was horrendous. Everything was bright orange moving horizontally at a reported 120kph. It lasted about 20 minutes after which we were able to move upstairs to the dining room but unable to move outside due to the intense heat.

From this vantage point we were able to watch the unfolding destruction of the Cotter buildings burning. The erupting gas bottles were spectacular. With dismay we watched the flames creep up the hill towards the manager's residence. The surrounding brush fencing erupted. It must have been an hour or so later that we were able to venture out to gauge the destruction. In doing so, the firies were able to extinguish spot fires on and around buildings. A close inspection in daylight the next morning revealed that the fire had passed through the entire site with almost every building sustaining some damage. The manager's residence survived.

No lives were lost and there were no injuries. The only buildings with severe damage were the Cotter buildings – and they were burnt to the ground.

The Management Committee no longer had to deliberate on the future of the Cotter buildings. It had a job to do – rebuild. Now 19 years later we continually thank God for this unexpected blessing through the horrors of those bushfires. The new Cotter Centre is the preferred accommodation for our clients.

Harold Small
Chair, Greenhills Board



The fire is coming upon the Old Cotter Centre, photo provided by Harold Small



The new Cotter Centre, photo from [Greenhills Conference Centre | Canberra's Premier Group Accommodation And Conference Facility \(greenhillscentre.org.au\)](https://www.greenhillscentre.org.au)



Under the bee tree

An old gum tree in the paddock is home to a beehive.
Peace flows through the air with the bees.
The grace of God suffuses the light of the day and the dark of the night.
The cycle of time brings an easy calm.
Ancient stability and order create patterns of nature in evolution.
Making honey through the summer, the bees delight in joy.
Ready for the cooler months, food stored for winter.
The braid of eternity begins again.
Causality underpins everything everywhere everywhen.
Relationships of subtle care and concern create the aura of love.
Care is the meaning of being.
The bees are connected to the tree, which has roots in the earth and leaves in the sky.
All is one. Feeling the earth, we are connected to heaven.

The Spirit of God is revealed in the language of connected relationships.

Divine grace creates the energy of love and production.

All life and all matter are made in the image of God.

Reverence for complexity is the heart of awe and wonder.

Sublime mystery supports our existence as soul.

Listen for the voice of God in nature.

Christ is present among the bees, the trees, the soil, the sky, the people.

Look up to the stars. See the immense glory of eternity surrounding you.

Wonder why we wilfully wreck wonderful worlds.

Pray for healing, for dialogue, for understanding, for reason, for truth, for love, for grace.

Justice brings forgiveness in the face of wrath.

Peace on earth and goodwill to all nature.

Robbie Tulip

With birdsong

<https://www.facebook.com/robert.tulip.7/videos/571414997494695>



